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Identity Construction in the Margins: A Case Study Involving Non-Conforming Youth

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Abstract

This qualitative instrumental case study explores how student members of an alternative educational program in a successful public middle school constructed identity, and how they interpreted their schooling experiences in relation to hegemonic educational practices. It draws on sociocultural and postmodern theories to focus on these youths' identities and on their perspectives of self and school practices. Its multiple methods collected data through alternative and mainstream classroom observations, focus group sessions, semi-structured individual interviews with students, parents, and school professionals, and an analysis of school documents. The youth participants of this study held multiply-constructed identities, and actively resisted and affirmed others' constructions of their "differences." Additionally, they readily deconstructed educational practices and offered a number of suggestions for reforms. This study adds to the literature on identity construction and advocates for the inclusion of non-conforming youths' own sociocultural and change oriented perspectives, along with increased reform efforts targeted towards this lesser-recognized population.

Keywords

Identity, At-Risk, Alternative Education, Case Study, Non-Conforming Youth, Middle School, School Practices

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Identity Construction in the Margins: A Case Study Involving Non-Conforming Youth

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This qualitative instrumental case study explores how student members of an alternative educational program in a successful public middle school constructed identity, and how they interpreted their schooling experiences in relation to hegemonic educational practices. It draws on sociocultural and postmodern theories to focus on these youths' identities and on their perspectives of self and school practices. Its multiple methods collected data through alternative and mainstream classroom observations, focus group sessions, semi-structured individual interviews with students, parents, and school professionals, and an analysis of school documents. The youth participants of this study held multiply-constructed identities, and actively resisted and affirmed others' constructions of their "differences." Additionally, they readily deconstructed educational practices and offered a number of suggestions for reforms. This study adds to the literature on identity construction and advocates for the inclusion of non-conforming youths' own sociocultural and change oriented perspectives, along with increased reform efforts targeted towards this lesser-recognized population.

Keywords: Identity, At-Risk, Alternative Education, Case Study, Non-Conforming Youth, Middle School, School Practices.

Lauren

I don't fit in here. Like I literally do not belong here.

It's my own way; you can dress however you want, but don't criticize me.

Austin

Be yourself even if other people judge you for it. I get judged for dressing like this. I just say *whatever* back and then they shut up.

My favorite lyric is: *we will never sleep, 'cause sleep is for the weak! And we will never rest, 'till we're all dead!* I like this because I always refuse to give up, or be silent when I'm told.

Sheina

Yeah, if you want me to respect you, then respect me first.

And rules tend to get me in trouble.

The above quotations were from eighth grade members of a suburban alternative education program. Although research efforts frequently center on the significant needs of traditionally marginalized American students, few studies address those of a smaller group of

youth -- those failing in suburban schools determined by the state to be “successful.”¹ The label “at-risk” is commonly utilized when referring to a student population such as the one at the center of this effort. While this term generally refers to students who are determined to be at a high risk for dropping out of formal schooling, the exact meaning of its connotative usage differs in separate institutions -- academically failing, behaviorally challenging, Special Education designated, students, etc. I contend this determination additionally infers that youth are in danger of not achieving the preferred goals of local schools and the greater society. Thus, this term also works to legitimize and mask the complicity of larger systems in its construction. Although the school comprising this study’s setting labeled my participants as being at-risk, I choose to refer to them as “non-conforming students” in this paper, in order to trouble the usual construction of youths at-risk. Students who are failing in schools that are otherwise successful comprise a research worthy, yet frequently overlooked, population. While their numbers may be small per individual institution, repercussions from this determination are significant to individual youth and, when multiplied across state and national levels, reverberate across societal levels. This study advocates for an inclusive consideration of this population by educators, school administrators, and larger policy decision makers. Optimal research efforts should strive to ensure the educational human rights of *all young people*, even those who are not traditionally included among more frequently recognized marginalized groups.

Kumashiro (2000) advocated that we continuously search for unrecognized “othered”² populations. This study complies with this author’s charge, as it explores the identity construction and related school engagement and understanding of a lesser recognized group of non-conforming students in relation to school practices -- both to practices that are hegemonically determined within schools and others that attempt to be *alternative*.³ Additionally, it strives to address a gap in literature related specifically to alternative education, as it answers Pifer’s (2000) challenge to utilize the actual voices of the youth who are involved in alternative systems. As this effort fulfills its postmodern goal to explore participant students’ multiplicity of subject positions, it focuses on these students’ identities as they are constructed throughout their experiences in school, and seeks knowledge of their daily lives being lived in the “margins” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 30) of a general educational system. I purport that a clearer understanding of how this mostly unrecognized group of youth are constructed as being different, and how, in relation they construct themselves, will lead to fuller realizations of the process of marginalization, and to our better understanding of practices in both the general and alternative educational systems.

Literature Review

Many current studies (Gable, et al., 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2000; Quinn, et al., 2006) refer to Raywid’s (1994, 1998) categories when discussing alternative education philosophies. Raywid (1994, 1998) states that existing programs may revolve around the following goals: (a) to change the students; (b) to change the school; (c) or to change the

¹ The criterion usually used to determine a school’s “successfulness” is that of the State of New York. My own criteria for a successful school is different and advocates for more complex criteria that cannot be determined through simple mathematical formulas, but take into account the success of schools as they administer to the ‘wholeness’ of youth.

² The term “Other” and derivatives of it-- Others, othering, othered -- will be used throughout this paper to refer to the state of separateness that occurs as social practices determine certain groups of people/students to be different from (and usually lesser than) the dominant population.

³ Alternative -- Educational practices targeting student populations at-risk of failing in schools are frequently labeled as being Alternative Education. I will alternately refer to this program as the alternative program, AE, the AE program, or Alternative Education, as did the members of this study’s school.

educational system. The first philosophy focuses on changing student behavior, the second is marked by innovative programs and a positive school environment, and the third is based within a desire to effect larger, system-wide change (Quinn, et al., 2006). Most current research emphasizes Raywid's (1994,1998) first goal -- effecting student behavioral change (Bauman, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006; Groves, 1998; Lloyd, 1997), and thus infers the need for student adherence to existing schooling practices. The institution at the center of this present study exemplified a combination of Raywid's (1994, 1998) "a" and "b" categories. Its alternative education program strived to fit a group of non-conforming students fully back into the larger institution and attempted (for their eighth grade year) to modify the manner in which their schooling was provided. However, it did not try to effect change within its larger school program or the wider educational system.

The studies of Eckert (1989) and Brown (2005) are among those that sought to expand constructions of difference to lesser-understood, non-dominant youth who are being schooled directly within a larger, majority population. Eckert's (1989) work attempted to improve understanding of students in relation to their peer-designated labels of "jocks" and "burnouts" (p. 1). Brown (2005) looked to "... contribute to broader attempts to mark our differences, especially within conceptualizations of whiteness, and to understand how the construction of whiteness varies across lines of class" (p. 147), in her comparison of adolescent working class and middle-class girls' identity constructions. My work furthers similar identity connected understandings, specifically as they relate to middle school students who are alternatively placed in a larger, general education setting. Additionally, I adhere to Pifer's (2000) call for the utilization of the actual voices of youth who are designated as being *alternative*.

Pifer's (2000) study consisted of interviews depicting the understanding of "problem" (p. 1) students in an alternative educational setting. He noted that the three male high school students whom he interviewed recognized the school-sourced determination of their problem-student designation, and he clearly emphasized the importance of using student voice in reaching his conclusions: "To understand the meanings assigned to school, schooling, and education by *problem* students we must listen to their explanations of and their perspectives on the process of schooling and their experiences with that social setting" (para.12). Additionally, Loutzenheiser (2002) stated the importance of student perspective. Her study centered on female students in an alternative high school and, like my study, depended on the utilization of student voice and a dynamic, postmodern framework to explore the identity construction of non-conforming youth.

Likewise, this present study points to the need for the inclusion of youths' voices in research, and for their own school-related constructions to be an integral component of reform efforts. Specifically, this work adds to the body of alternative education and identity literature, such as that of Pifer (2000) and Louzenheiser (2002), by focusing on middle school aged youth in an otherwise successful general education setting.

Context

More than a decade after NCLB (2002) adopted its goal to ensure that all children achieve educational success, many students continue to fail and are assumed to be at-risk. Non-dominant youths' constructions of identity and school practices in the margins of successful schools are largely unstudied. This study aligns with Miller and Goodnow's (1995) and Wenger's (1998) contentions that an examination of the social nature of practices is critical to such understanding. As advocated by Wenger (1998), I believe that an exploration of the "interconnectivity" and "negotiated roles" (p. 45) of participant youths' daily lives inside of their communities of practice is necessary. Rather than focusing on

larger cultural practices, I explored the social practices of the multiple communities inside these youths' specific middle school environment. Although these students were *official* members of their larger school, the boundaries between this institution's general and alternative education programs (communities) were fluid and restrictive. The practices inherent within these differing communities were oftentimes at odds and frequently resulted in conflicting power related issues and misunderstandings.

Most importantly, as this study obtained educational and youth related knowledge from its participants' own narrated realizations of identity, like the work of Georgakopoulou (2006) it sought knowledge of both these youths' "small story" identities -- those formed within their social interactions (Bamberg, 2006) -- and their larger, "big story" (Freeman, 2006; Mead, 2003) self-knowledge. It sought these understandings especially as they related to the places and practices inside of the school. I engaged in a process of in-depth interviewing that was necessary for obtaining narratives connected to the youths' "big story" understandings and, in order to discern the social interactions of their individual "small stories," undertook multiple observations.

The specific context for this work is an instrumental case study (with alternatively placed students as *case*) utilizing ethnographic methods in the eighth grade classroom that comprised the alternative education program of Morbrooke Middle School,⁴ a relatively affluent, mid-sized, suburban institution in upstate New York State.⁵ During my own former, twenty-two year public school teaching career, in this same institution, I had volunteered to be one of the instructors of Morbrooke's first version of an alternative education program.

During my previous time in Morbrooke Middle School, I had found the personal characteristics of the youth I came to know in this alternative classroom to be quite compelling; however, I had been somewhat perplexed by the reasons for their at-risk designations. Although, I could sense an obvious enthusiasm for life and an almost unbounded potential in the majority of these young people, it was obvious (to me) that many of the other building adults did not concur with my opinion. Additionally, I had to admit that the majority of these young people were, in fact, in danger of academically failing within this school. I wondered what had transpired for these youth to come to be designated as being "at-risk," and sought to understand the relationship between what a young person said in regards to himself/herself and the outcome of his/her schooling. It seemed obvious to me that much more than teaching methodology was pertinent to an individual's educational outcome. Later, after I had moved on from the alternative program, this particular school, and teaching at the K-12 levels, these former students and my questions concerning them remained. I welcomed an opportunity to return to Morbrooke Middle School's alternative program, this time in the role of a researcher.

Methods

Before commencing this study at Morbrooke Middle School, I obtained IRB permission from the Higher Education institution with which I was formerly affiliated, then shared a prospectus of my study with Morbrooke Middle School's principal and received his permission to commence my research. I next met with the Alternative Education (AE) team members and the outside-of-AE general education teachers of the students in this program, and obtained their willingness to participate. All of these adults agreed to be interviewed, and the AE team members also granted me permission to conduct observations in their

⁴ All names are pseudonyms

⁵ The community in which this school was located had an average/above average median family income of \$70,792 (New York State average-\$54,659) (City-Data, 2009). Morbrooke Middle School had 1,052 students in the sixth through eighth grades during the 2009-2010 school year (nySTART, 2009).

weekly team meetings. Although the AE classroom teacher readily agreed to participate in an interview and to allow me to conduct observations in her classroom, she was initially hesitant to grant permission for me to videotape during AE class time. However, following a discussion during which she voiced her hesitancy and I promised to strive for the taping to proceed as non-disruptively as possible, she gave approval and planning for videotaping of observations in this setting commenced.

Although none of Morbrooke's 2010 - 2011 students had been members of the middle school when I had been a teacher there, I made sure to clarify my present role as a researcher to all of the current AE student members, along with the fact that I held no authoritative position in relation to them. I undertook this latter procedure in order to encourage these youth to feel most comfortable in speaking honestly with me. Likewise, as a number of the adults at Morbrooke did remember my previous role as an educator at this school, I also engaged in honest initial discussions with each individual who had agreed to be involved in my study, in order to detail my current position as a researcher. I especially emphasized the ethical responsibilities I held within this role, particularly those involving my commitment to maintain the confidentiality of my student and adult participants.

Participants

Student Participants

Twelve eighth grade members of Morbrooke Middle School's alternative education program comprised this study's student participants. These youth spent half of their school day receiving small-group instruction and counseling services in a separate program designated classroom and the remainder of their day among the school's general education population and classrooms. These AE student members had been determined to be at-risk of school failure by adults within this institution, but they (as a mandate for program inclusion) did not otherwise qualify for special education services. The twelve youth participants were those of this school's fourteen 2010-2011 alternative education classroom members who agreed to participate, following an informational meeting at which I introduced the intent of my research to the entire AE class; additionally, each of these students' parent(s) was provided study information and was asked to indicate approval for his/her child to be involved. Nine male and three female students comprised the final youth participant group, a gender-related demographic that well represents the statistics often found in settings designated as being alternative (personal experiential knowledge). Of these youth, ten of the twelve were White (83% of the class), one was Black, (approximately 8% of the class), and one was of Multiracial background (approximately 8% of the class).⁶ Although, as I began this study, I had wondered if race/ethnicity would play a factor in the determination of alternative classification, this designation did not seem to be a factor in this school, at least not during the year in which my study took place. Family issues involving money were mentioned in connection to four out of this class' twelve AE members and ten of these youth lived in a single parent home (Team field notes, January, 2011). The ages of my youth participants ranged from just thirteen to almost fifteen years of age. Additionally, five central participants (three females and two males) were chosen from this group for in-depth interviews; again, this choice was based solely on the students' self-initiative.

⁶ Demographically, during the 2009-2010 school year, this institution was 87% White; 5% Black; 3% Latino/a; and 4% Asian; 2% Multiracial; 7 % of its students qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch (nySTART, 2009).

Adult Participants

In addition to the student members of this study, the five adults connected to the alternative education program (teacher, teaching assistant, social worker, program administrator, guidance counselor), general education instructors of five of the AE students' outside-of-program classes, four additional Morbrooke adults (two school administrators, a security guard and an "In-School-Suspension" supervisor), along with five of the central participant students' parents agreed to be interviewed. Data from the transcriptions of interviews with these participants allowed me to compare and contrast the self-constructions of these youth with perceptions held about them by the adults in their lives.

Data Sources

The multiple methods I utilized in this study occurred in Morbrooke Middle School's alternative education classroom and in its broader school settings. My total data sources consisted of field notes from 46 observations, transcriptions from 33 interviews and 3 focus group sessions, transcriptions and image analysis from 22 videos, and text analysis of numerous school and alternative classroom documents. Thirty-five participant observations were conducted in the alternative education classroom and 21 non-participant observations took place in five of the school's mainstream classrooms in which AE team members were class members, and in this institution's hallways and cafeteria. I videotaped my participant observations but, in order to maintain the anonymity of non-study students, engaged in no videotaping in classrooms outside of the alternative setting. Three videotaped focus group sessions were held with the twelve participant student members in the alternative education classroom, and semi-structured and in-depth interviews transpired with each of the five central AE student participants (three interviews, each), their parents (one interview each), and the other adult school personnel (one interview each). An examination of school and student related documents (including AE program student recommendations, AE program procedure documents, report cards of AE students, and other miscellaneous documents) rounded out my data gathering sources. Finally, I undertook audiotaping, videotaping, field note recording, and continual memo noting, in conjunction with all of my methods. The multiple data sources I pursued helped me to triangulate data received from my student participants and reduced the possibility of researcher bias.

Data Analysis Procedures

Grounded Theory Approach to Discursive Data

I utilized Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach to analyze data from my study's observation field notes, interviews and focus group transcripts, and school documents. Throughout the entire analysis process, my primary goal was to discern meaning as my participant students constructed it. I then compared and contrasted these understandings with those garnered from the adult participants and the study's other data sources. I began the analysis procedure immediately upon receiving the first data from the field, and found that a process of continuous analysis, related memo noting, and organizing of the large amounts of obtained data into a series of tables and charts, helped me to render clearer meanings. Initially, I determined codes from my discursive data sources on a line-by-line basis and from my non-verbal interactions (noted via videotaping or directly during observations) on an incident-by-incident basis. Later, I shifted to coding larger discursive

events, a process that allowed me to efficiently refine my codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Finally, I engaged in the processes of “axial coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60) and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57) as coding proceeded, these allowing me to relate and further refine my codes and, subsequently, to build them into categories, subcategories, sub-themes and the study’s overall themes.

Additional Discursive Approach for Understanding Identity

In addition to the analysis procedures above, I also adhered to Gee and Crawford’s (1998) and Gee’s (2000 -2001) suggestions for discourse analysis, in order to understand my participant youths’ key identity related motifs and affinities. I engaged in this process with the transcriptions of student discourse from interviews, and also in relation to the field notes I had made during my multiple observations of student interactions. This analysis procedure was laid on top of, accomplished concomitantly, and inter-related to the coding processes detailed in the previous section. While I utilized individual participant students’ interviews as the primary source for motifs linked to their identities, I also found -- as was emphasized by Ochs and Capps (2001) -- that meaning made within group interactions was likewise indicative of this factor. The combination of Charmaz’s (2006) coding techniques, along with Gee’s (2000 -2001) and Gee and Crawford’s (1998) discourse analysis means, enabled me to commit more fully to Atkinson and Coffey’s (2003) and Holstein and Gubrium’s (2000) advice to focus on “what is done” and “what is said” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003, p. 110).

Interaction Analysis of Videographic Data

Finally, I followed the advice of Jordan and Henderson (1995) for an analysis of videotaped data. I made an initial “content log” (p. 43) of each videotape and subsequently chose interesting/relevant segments of tape from these logs with which to proceed with the coding process as described above. The totality of these analysis procedures, across the massive amount of data I gathered during this study, led to (and supported my confidence in) the findings that I discuss below.

Findings

In important and diverse ways, the alternatively placed youth of this school represented students constructed to be “Others.” This perception was held by both the adult and student members of the school’s general education population and by the student members of the alternative program, themselves. Designations of *outsider* status stemmed from both perceived and actual interactions between school members or seemed to be a long-held construction of the participant’s own self-perception. A primary finding of this study was that its youth participants clearly recognized their frequently *othered* positioning within the school; they often used terms such as “different,” “popular,” and “teacher’s pet” (Student interviews, October - January, 2010-2011) to describe other students who (they believed) matched the school’s official and implied expectations. All youth participants gave examples of times when they had felt unaccepted by, and different from, other Morbrooke youths and adults. Importantly, I noted the self-perception of this identity to be found in my participant youth only in relation to their identities within the school. As will be noted in the profiles to follow, these young people frequently expressed pride in the ways in which they believed themselves to be different, even as they decried the accompanying rejection and bullying that oftentimes came with this determination. Interestingly, at least several of the youths’ parents

also recognized ways in which their children were unique; again, they too often proudly noted these differences.

School adults' conceptualizations of alternative education-based youth were diverse. Many of their interpretations represented stereotypical constructions of AE students and assumed that all such youth were at-risk for the same reason. In general, the adults within the General Education programs most often stated this assertion. The words of one eighth grade teacher are representative: "Kids nominated for AE have things in their lives that are not normal...they're messed up in some way. They have things that go on in their lives that you normally wouldn't say, *Oh yeah, that's normal*" (Interview, December, 2010). However, a few school adults -- mostly those directly connected to the alternative education team -- recognized the wide range of diversity among the AE group of students and the varying reasons for their perceived atypicality from institutional expectations: "There's all kinds of things you know. Some of them have to do with organization. Some of them have to do with, you know, the family life, [they] need somebody here to structure this for them...You know, there's just not one kind (Interview with house principal, January, 2011).

The main purpose of my study was to better understand the self-constructed identities of the alternatively placed students in the margins of my setting's officially determined successful school. As I believe this understanding needs to be primarily sourced within the students' own voices, I share, below, the profiles of three representative central youth participants. These profiles stem from the "living narrative" (Ochs & Capps, 2001) of the three interviews I engaged in with each central alternative education youth participant, along with from related additional insights that I gathered from the study's other multiple data sources. I chose the specific youth narratives that follow because they represent a sampling of the unique determinations of *othering* and student understanding that I found within this school. Each profile begins with a direct quotation (from a power point slide that each youth created as part of an English/Computer joint class project), and is followed by key-motifs (Gee & Crawford, 1998) and affinity factors (Gee, 2000-2001) that were illustrative of the student's identity. Following the descriptive profiles of these central participants and their thoughts on the practices of schooling, I summarize the profiles in relation to the study's larger findings.

Lauren

I am an out-going person. I try my best and like to have a lot of fun. I am also kinda weird... - Truly, I belong in a straight-jacket.

Lauren's Identity-Related Factors

Key motifs (Gee & Crawford, 1998). - family; high activity level; a finely tuned sensitivity to the social world within the school; a dichotomous relationship between a desire for social acceptance and a pride in being different and unique.

Affinity factor (Gee, 2000-2001). - family.

Lauren celebrated her thirteen birthday during this study. She was the youngest and smallest member of Morbrooke Middle School's 2010-2011 Alternative Education class. However, this stature did not represent her personality. Lauren had light brown, shoulder-length hair with blond streaks on the side. By the conclusion of the study, her hair was red with blond side-streaks, and she told me that she was reclaiming her original color after having dyed it for seven years (Student interview, March, 2011). Besides her vivacious personality, I most remember Lauren's style; each time I entered the school, I looked

forward to finding out what unique outfit she had chosen to wear that day. Once, I asked her how many hats she owned and learned the number was at least fifty. My favorites were the fuzzy black and white panda hat, with ears and two foot *tails* with paws at the end, a devil hat with horns, and a Santa cap, with a white tassel on a spring bouncing on its top. Whereas, Lauren most frequently wore black ski pants, a black hoodie with black and white striped sleeves, and high black leather boots, she adamantly asserted that many of the “popular girls” favored clothes that were pink, orange, and yellow -- “And I hate that. I hate that. I do not like bright colors” (Interview, October, 2010); Lauren thought this might be one reason she didn’t fit in.

Lauren lived with her dad and step-mom -- Ben and Diane -- parents who were very supportive of her efforts in school (AE field notes, September, 2010). Diane, who had been a part of her stepdaughter’s life for nine years at the time of this study, was a college graduate student; each night, she and Lauren sat at the kitchen table to do homework. Diane told me that she was “just lucky to have Lauren” (Parent interview, December, 2010). Both parents took part in the interview because Ben believed that, as Lauren’s step-mom, Diane was a key component in all of their lives. In fact, upon learning from the district’s website about the alternative program, Diane (along with Ben) had advocated for Lauren’s admittance. Diane shared with me that she was presently exploring options at the district’s high school for her stepdaughter. Both parents relayed that their home was highly structured in regards to Lauren’s family and school responsibilities, and believed this factor to be key to her success in the future. Ben commented: “Lauren and her sister are my whole world; I’d do whatever for them to succeed” (Team/Parent meeting field notes, December, 2010).

Lauren reciprocated the emotional interest of her dad and step-mom, and thus “family” represented an “affinity” (Gee, 2000-2001) component of her identity. Included among the things she listed as making her happy were “friends and family,” and “being home” (English/Computer presentation slide, November, 2010). Lauren expressed the desire to do well in school because, “I don’t want to let my parents down with my grades” (Interview, December, 2010). Besides family, she exhibited a passion for creativity, especially art. In addition to displaying her artistic side on a daily basis with her dress, Lauren identified herself as “an artist” (Interview, October, 2010). Tied into the importance that family held to her identity, she told me that she first became interested in art when her mom commented that an early flower drawing she had made was “really good - one of those artistic things good” (Interview, October, 2010). However, Lauren was self-critical about her own artwork, and worried that her paintings were “not as good as Van Gogh’s. I want them to be as good as his one day” (Interview, October, 2010). In addition to art, she enjoyed fashion and playing the guitar. In regards to her daughter’s creative side, Diane stated, “She doesn’t really have to work for it. It just comes naturally” (Parent interview, December, 2010).

Lauren’s parents believed that the alternative education program’s increased structure and promise of additional assistance helped their daughter academically. When recommended for the program, she had been failing seventh grade Math and was barely passing Social Studies and Spanish. At that time, Lauren’s guidance counselor commented, “She has a great personality and a wide variety of interests, none of which include academic content” (Intake recommendation document, viewed September, 2010). Besides creativity, her most commonly noted characteristic was a very high physical activity level. Lauren’s dad described her as being “impulsive,” and her step-mom commented, “she just needs to get the energy out” (Parent interview, December, 2010). Lauren herself recognized and expressed concern about the difficulty she had paying attention in classes and her high activity level represented the second key motif of her identity components. She equated the AD/HD that she was diagnosed as having with “acting crazy” (Initial student interview,

October, 2010) and stated, “Ah, I don’t know why it is so hard for me to pay attention, but I’m trying to focus, just trying to get through the day” (Interview, December, 2010). Related to this need for activity, Lauren considered Physical Education to be a welcome break in her school day: “All day in school you just sit in the seats and just learn. In gym you can just go nuts. You can just run around and it will be okay because it’s gym. Feels good!” (Interview, October 2010).

Lauren’s statement “I don’t belong in this place” (Initial student interview) was one of the sadder comments I heard during my study. She traced being “picked on” to elementary school and equated it to “when I was really crazy” (Initial student interview, October, 2010). This student had a finely tuned sensitivity to the social world of the school and the characteristic of social sensitivity represented her third identity motif. Her conceptualization of the social world was complicated, and in regards to her, it was highly contradictory. She was the first student participant to note and detail the existence of distinct social groups amongst her peers, telling me, “Yeah. It’s like I’m probably one of the people who don’t really fit in a group. Umm there are people who get along with everybody, which would be me. But, not a lot of people get along with me” (Initial student interview, October, 2010). Lauren said that she was often picked on, particularly by “preppy girls”: “They roll their eyes and they’re like *aaugh* (growling and making a growling face)” (Interview, October, 2010). However, she also characterized Morbrooke as being, “really nice, I mean people are really nice to each other” (Interview, October, 2010). She numbered her school friends at approximately six, and shared that these were mostly boys because they were more likely to accept the way she dressed. About the other students, she commented, “And since they’re unhappy they’re probably looking for someone worse off than they are, which would probably be me. But, the friends I do have are awesome!” (Interview, December, 2010). These contradictory opinions about the school’s social world were indicative of her fourth identity connected key motif -- an oftentimes conflicting relationship between a desire for social approval and yet a pride in being different and unique.

Lauren also related that people called her “Emo,” but then hypothesized that these people had never seen an Emo person, as that would be “someone who is really depressed and is a pessimist always looking on the dark side. And I am an optimist and I always try to look for the brighter side of the situation” (Student interview, December, 2010). This young woman’s dad and step-mom recognized the conflicting nature of this component in their daughter. Diane told me that Lauren “really likes the social aspects of school” (Parent interview, December, 2010), yet both parents worried that she didn’t seem to have a lot of friends. Diane discussed the importance (and the difficulty) that being unique held for her stepdaughter:

I think that right now the one thing that does kind of bother her when I talk to her is she likes kind of being different, an individual. But she knows that kids think she's strange. Or maybe dresses strange. Or maybe acts a little strange. So she knows that. But she likes that. She likes that part about her, so she's not really willing to change that part about her; or conform. (Parent interview, December, 2010)

Diane recognized the identity conflict within Lauren, and it was clear that both parents accepted their daughter for whomever she chose to be. My own favorite statement regarding Lauren came from her step-mom -- “She’s just very Lauren. (Laughs). She’s just very Lauren! (laughs)” (Parent interview, December, 2010).

Among the *gifts* given to me by this study’s students, those stemming from Lauren were most obvious. She always made me feel welcome in the AE setting and never failed to

smile at me, as I walked into the room. I, in turn, never left this young woman's presence without a smile on my own face. I was most impressed with Lauren's braveness and tenacity to recognize and maintain her unique identity, despite social and institutional disapproval.

Lauren (and her parents) believed the alternative program had been of benefit, and categorized its people as being "a special kind of awesome." She compared the class to a "variety club - where all sorts of different people come together and talk" (First focus group, September, 2010), and summarized the interactions among AE class members as being more accepting and less judgmental than those found between students outside of the program. Her suggestions for improving instruction within the school centered on her preference for more physically active, hands-on work; several times, I observed her incorporate artwork into her assignments. Towards the end of my time in the field, I was happy to find a suggestion of hope that Lauren's peers would eventually appreciate the unique individual they had in their midst. While they continued to tease her, they additionally voted her the "Most Individualistic Student" for the 8th grade "Superlatives" page of Morbrooke's annual yearbook -- an honor that Lauren readily accepted and proudly shared with me upon my next visit to her class.

Austin

I'm bold, outgoing, unashamed of anything, kind to those who deserve it, and courageous. (Austin, English/Computer presentation slide)

Austin's Identity-Related Factors

Key motifs. (*Gee & Crawford, 1998*). - Critically examining the larger world, Morbrooke Middle School, and himself.

Affinities (*Gee, 2000-2001*). - a scientific belief framework; music.

Perhaps surprisingly (but meaningfully), Lauren was not the only Alternative Education youth named "Most Individualistic Student" out of Morbrooke's three hundred plus eighth graders in the "Superlatives" section of the 2011 yearbook. Austin was a thirteen-year-old young man of medium build with dark brown hair to his shoulders. Although all of the AE students readily participated in interviews and focus group sessions with me, this youth was especially enthusiastic about the opportunity to voice his ideas and opinions. He was an intelligent, introspective young man -- a critical eighth grade philosopher.

When Austin was recommended for the Alternative Education program in the 7th grade, he was failing Art, Science, Social Studies and Spanish (Intake recommendation document, viewed September, 2010). His were the most negative of all the student intake notes I read:

Very poor self concept which makes him feel like everyone is picking on him because he looks, dresses differently; can be loud and seem self-centered; I don't think he really *fits* in anywhere. (Principal)

When angry, shuts down and seems to think refusal to work is justified. (Reading teacher)

Likes to disagree with you for the sake of being confrontational. (Math teacher)

Obviously, Austin was not a good match for a number of teachers' expectations of middle school *student*. Early in the school year, the AE teacher shared that she had heard stories about this youth from his seventh grade teachers, and was a little nervous about having him as a class member. However, after knowing Austin for a while, this teacher changed her mind: "Luckily, these fears have been unfounded so far; you know the interpretations some people make" (AE team field notes, September, 2010). However, by December of the school year, she too was tiring of his opinions. Although Austin continued to do well in both the alternative program and the larger school settings, his teacher told me, "He will complain about anything! He wants to push the boundaries and shock people" (Interview, December, 2010). Due to the fact that I was not trying to get him to conform to the expectations of the middle school, my own interactions with Austin were enjoyable; I found him to be bright, articulate, and introspective. He experienced education through his own critical lens, yet (no doubt unknown and potentially surprising to many of this teacher) was one of the school's strongest supporters (as discussed below) of school practices and its adult leaders. His opinions aligned with his broadly encompassing, orderly viewpoint of the larger world and to his overall acceptance of a top down power authority, even within an educational institution.

There were three identity-related key motifs in my analysis of Austin's narratives and all of these involved philosophizing -- on the larger world, on the school, and on himself. He displayed an affinity towards a scientific framework when discussing ideas related to his philosophy on the larger world. Although he told me that he was raised in the Catholic religion, he now considered himself to be an atheist and commented, "If the Lord is almighty, why doesn't he intervene?" [in the problems of the world] (Interview, October, 2010); he mentioned that religion just didn't correlate well with his scientific viewpoint. Austin had a strong affinity towards music, especially to one particular heavy metal band, and again I found that he placed this interest into a larger life context. He was quite motivated to help me understand that music is not just a means of entertainment, but an expression of emotion, and aligned *blues* with "sadness and darkness" and *heavy metal* music "with anger or religion." He was especially enthusiastic to dispel stereotypes that he believed were connected to heavy metal and, as he quoted lines from one song and explained their connection to religion, told me: "Music is a lot more than just listening or passing the time to me" (Interview, October, 2010). Austin's belief in music's centrality to an individual's identity, especially his own, was clearly apparent in this statement.

Austin's ideas about Morbrooke and its people were connected to his thinking on the larger world and to his constructions of himself as being a unique individual. He resented the stereotyping that was done of (and by) youth, and was particularly quick to critique his student peers, claiming that, "Most of the kids in my grade who I'm not friends with is because they are tools or posers" (Initial student interview, October, 2010). To my question of what "tools and posers" were, he told me:

When I say somebody's a tool I mean that they're very dependent, they will copy anybody; another sense would be posers. And it kind of aggravates me because they have no opinion whatsoever and they think they're better than everybody. And I feel sorry for them. (Initial student interview, October, 2010)

As with the other students I interviewed, Austin had clear ideas about the way in which students grouped themselves inside of the school, telling me:

In this entire school district most people are divided up into groups, from *nerds* -- basically people who spend a lot of their time going through books learning everything, to *jocks* -- people who play sports. There are the *norms* who don't really do anything; they're just there. Then we go to [those] wearing darker clothes, those people call *Emo*...because it's short for emotional, although Emo is a style of music which is a lot like Screamo and heavier rock. (Interview, November, 2010)

Austin told me that his classmates included him in the Emo group because of his dark clothing and choice of music, but he thought this designation was due to stereotyping and stated, "I'm just being myself" (Student interview, October, 2010). I concluded that most of his male peers took a wary, unsure stance in regards to him, and most of his main school friendships were with a small group of girls. In general, he was highly critical of his peers, telling me, "most of the students' maturity levels are the worst part of this school" (Interview, November, 2010). This youth took pride in his own and other students' perception of his *difference*, and proudly talked about the acceptance he received outside school from older high school students and others having similar interests to his own.

Conversely to the manner in which he regarded peers in school, Austin displayed a high level of support for the adults of this school and its practices. He could be critical of school elders he thought were unfair and defined this faction as being those "who do not take all sides of a situation into account," yet he supported the need for the school's disciplinary structure and rules: "the administrators are very important to keep everything going" (Interview, November, 2010). In fact, his opinions related to Morbrooke's adults and practices aligned with his broadly encompassing, orderly viewpoint of the larger world and to his overall acceptance of a top-down power authority. Whereas the other students complained about aspects of the school curriculum, Austin stated, "but that comes from requirements given from the law" (Interview, November, 2010). He claimed that the head principal had the most authority in the school, the assistant principal had some power, and an administrator would be the most important person to get to know for someone new to Morbrooke Middle School. While asserting, "authority doesn't trust the capability of kids to make rules for a non-chaotic society" (Interview, October, 2010), he credited the head principal and administrator connected to the AE program for listening to Morbrooke's students, "I think they realize that we have the power to change things based on our acts, just like others in society. So they reach out and listen to us, see what we have to say, what we think" (Interview, November, 2010). He agreed with the different levels of power in the school and society, but also included student voice as a necessary (though lesser) component of agency.

As did Lauren, Austin had specific suggestions about school reform. He excitedly described to me a British system that he thought American schools should follow, one in which youth are exposed to numerous and diverse educational subjects and topics. He related that schooling doesn't become "serious" in this system until approximately the age of fifteen, at which time a student could voice his own specific chosen path. I finished my interviews with Austin quite sure that the adults who knew him in school would be surprised at the seriousness and depth with which this youth contemplated the Educational system.

Overall, I found Austin's self-constructions to be emphatic, concretely described, and based in the reality of the world as he interpreted it. Accordingly, he told me, "They must be mistaken" when in November his "Student of the Month" award stated that he had "a positive attitude" (Field notes, November, 2010). I, as an adult not directly affiliated with Morbrooke, enjoyed this youth's enthusiastically spoken and thoughtful opinions, but the same was not true for many of this school's adults and other youth. Even so, Austin fared better in regards

to grades and disciplinary consequences while being a member of the alternative program, and these factors seemed to provide him (and his opinions) a greater measure of acceptance. During our last interview, Austin told me that he would probably sign up for the alternative program at the high school, "It's just another year of school. It's not that big of a deal" (Interview, March, 2011). Although his current life view was primarily positivistic, this youth's suggestions for potential schooling reforms were impressively imaginative and his support of the hegemonic school structure would no doubt be surprising to many of the adults who knew him. Austin was a strong advocate for an inclusion of youth agency in school decision-making, and his ideas lent support to study implications of the need for youth agency in efforts towards school reform.

Sheina

I know a lot of what there is to become an adult and what adults do and everything. (Initial student interview, October 2010)

Sheina's Identity-Related Factors

Key motifs. (Gee & Crawford, 1998). - self- construction as an adult; rebellion against school practices that "treat [her] like a baby."

Affinity. (Gee, 2000-2001). - "the real world."

A third of the way through the school year, I was never sure if Sheina would remain a member of Morbrooke's Alternative Education program, as trying to decide whether, or not, to ask her to leave the program was a frequent topic of the AE team's meetings (Team meeting field notes, November, 2010); the teacher was concerned that Sheina was not really committed to the program's contract. All of the team's adult members worried about the message that her behavior and continuation in the class set for the other students. Sheina turned fifteen in May of the 2010-2011 school year, and was thus slightly older than most of her classmates (as a result of being held back in the first grade) (Parent interview, December, 2010). This fact no doubt contributed to this young woman's identity, but it did not explain the entire picture. There were two primary identity-related motifs in this student's narratives -- self-construction as an adult and rebellion against school practices that "treat[ed her] like a baby" (Student interview, October, 2010; Parent interview, December, 2010). Together with discourse connected to Sheina's predominant affinity regarding *the real world*, I was able to gather significant knowledge connected to this student's forthright, complex identity. She was the program's highest profile student and its adult members seemed to recognize some of the multiplicity of identity characteristics interacting within her: "She's tough, but there's a nice little girl she doesn't want anybody to know in there" (AE teacher, team meeting field notes, (September, 2010).

Sheina was failing 4 subjects and had 97 absences when she was recommended to Morbrooke's Alternative Education program in April, of 2010 (Alternative Education intake recommendation documents, viewed September, 2010). In addition to academic issues, the school's adults expressed concern for her socially and behaviorally: "She hangs out with other girls who do not have the best influence on her" (AE intake document, viewed September, 2010); "[she'll] be pregnant within the next couple of years" (Team meeting field notes, November, 2010). Additionally, they worried about her home life: "Mom is more like her older sister, she's not supervising the kids" (Team meeting field notes, November, 2010). While all of the student participants in my study gave evidence of multiple identities, this characteristic was most apparent in relation to Sheina, as were its complexities.

Sheina's mom, Brenda, was forthright, like her daughter. Only she and this eldest daughter had made up their family unit for the first nine years of Sheina's life. Brenda believed that this factor, along with the complexities created by her (Brenda's) state of constant pain from a past car accident, resulted in a close mother/daughter relationship. She described her daughter as being, "loyal, friendly, and honest, maybe too honest [forthright]" (Interview, December, 2010). She shared with me that Sheina had been molested by an adult in her pre-school program, and told me that she was currently seeking a second round of outside counseling for her daughter, as an earlier counselor had told her this need might arise again when she became a teenager. As Brenda characterized Sheina as being "helpful and independent," she relayed a story about how, as a seven year old, she had began to set an alarm, get her own breakfast, and go to the bus stop independently, because the pain from her accident related injuries made getting up difficult and "being late for school made Sheina insane" (Interview, December, 2010). She told me that her daughter was retained in first grade solely due to her efforts: "I went to the top of the district and argued," and that Sheina had spent several years in the Special Education system, also because she (Brenda) advocated for this placement (Interview with Sheina's mother, December, 2010).

At the time of our interview, Brenda believed Sheina was very creative and good at spatially visualizing items ("as in interior designing") and was excellent with animals. She told me that she began having difficulties with school for the second time while in the sixth grade, as she "had issues with feeling treated as baby" (by the school), and claimed that the daughter she knew outside of school was "totally different" from the girl known at Morbrooke (Interview, December, 2010). Sheina lived at home with her mom and six year old sister, and waited for her sister to get off the school bus everyday; the AE team expressed pleasure, and some surprise, at the beginning of the year when they learned about this fact, as this youth was not acknowledged for her helpfulness inside of the school environment.

Sheina echoed the information her mom gave me about their home life and told me, "My family treats me like an adult." (Interview, October, 2010). She claimed "to know a lot of what there is to become an adult," and shared:

They don't keep secrets from me. I basically know everything. I know everything there is to being... not everything like bills-wise, but I know a lot of what there is to become an adult and what adults do and everything. (Interview, October, 2010)

Sheina listed her home responsibilities as taking care of her little sister "all of the time," babysitting many of her cousins, helping out with younger children at her church, and taking responsibility for her cats. She relayed that she, a girl friend, and a boy friend had "hung out until 2:00 a.m." the previous weekend, and that her mom liked her (Sheina's) old boy friend: "He lived with us before" (Interview, March, 2011). Perhaps most demonstrative of the adult level of responsibility Sheina was given in her home was that Brenda gave her daughter complete responsibility for monitoring, taking, and making decisions concerning the usage of medicine for AD/HD. Brenda told me, "So this year she said, *well I don't think I need it anymore*. I said, okay, you're old enough to decide whether or not this is something that you need" (Interview, December, 2010).

In contrast to her home, Sheina complained that Morbrooke "thinks I'm this little kid who's into school" and (as her mom had shared) complained that the school "treats me as a baby" (Initial student interview, October, 2010). When I asked her what she disliked about the school's rules, she replied: "Well it's just like everything. You can't do anything without getting in trouble. You can't walk five steps to the bathroom without getting in trouble. And just like the way you walk is funny, what you're wearing is funny (Interview, October, 2010).

Sheina refused to automatically accept the authority of school adults, as was an expected practice in this (and most) educational institutions, and within this stance did not moderate her home-based identity to the expected role of institutionally expected student. She noted, “If I could change anything here I’d change the way the teachers treat us. I want them to treat us like we’re their equals” (Interview, October, 2010). She continuously questioned and rebelled against the expectations of school and the unequal power balance that she found between its adults and youth members.

Discourse and interactions related to rebelling represented the second key motif tied into Sheina’s identity. At the end of November, I was given permission to take her out of In-School-Suspension (ISS) for our second interview, and particularly noted her fidgety, agitated-appearing affect. She readily told me that she had been in ISS, “probably six times this month,” and was there now, “for getting ten disciplinary referrals; I just walk away from a principal” (Second student interview, November, 2010). She shared:

I hate listening to the rules. There’s too many rules here. Some of them are ridiculous. Like of I want to go to the bathroom, sometimes I’ll just get up and go. Just, see ya! They say, *Sheina, where ya going?* I’m going to the bathroom. *Well now you can’t go.* Well now I’m gonna go if I want ta go. It’s kind of like that. (Interview, 2010)

Sheina’s belief that “others” were responsible for getting her into trouble was apparent within her discourse. In November, she told me that she didn’t like the AE program anymore because its teacher had, “gotten me in trouble. She’s gotten me like probably half of the referrals I’ve gotten” (interview, November, 2010). Sheina also thought her house principal “looks for trouble” (Interview, October, 2010). She described Morbrooke’s adults as being judgmental and unequal in their disciplinary actions:

They pick and choose and if you look like, umm, let’s say if you have glasses, they think you’re going to be a good kid. And then if you’re wearing a hoodie, they think you’re going to be a bad kid. And if you put things in your hair, they think you’re going to be an okay kid. You know it’s like they judge, judge, judge you. (Interview, October, 2010)

Continuous questioning of unequal adult-youth privileges and authoritative positionings was a clear thread throughout Sheina’s narratives and interactions. The usage of her cell phone during school hours frequently led to disciplinary consequences, and this usually resulted in her phone being taken away until after school. An instance when the AE teacher took her phone away and put it into the top drawer of her own desk was indicative of her non-acceptance of adult authoritative boundaries; Sheina immediately went into the teacher’s desk and retrieved the phone. About this, she told me, “So I took it out of the desk. She was like, you don’t go in my property. I was like, next time you don’t take mine. Yeah, if you want me to respect you then respect me first” (Interview, November, 2011). Usage of the term *respect* was common in Sheina’s discourse and, in her understanding, this always meant equal adult-student respect.

Sheina’s affinity to “the real world” tied into her motif of constructing self as adult. While she continuously rebelled against many of the practices of schooling, she also placed value on education, but this was only in relation to the future and the real world about which she cared. She defined the real world as, “being grown up and getting a job and everything” and told me, “learning should be based on how the real world is” (Initial student interview, October, 2010). Sheina looking forward to the high school because she thought it would be

less restrictive and thus closer to the adult world, “It will be more free-er (sic) there and there will be less reason to rebel. And it’s a lot more free-er. So I wouldn’t really have a reason to rebel” (Interview, November, 2010). Additionally, she predicted that she would do better in the high school, because of its greater number of choices.

When I last saw Sheina, at the end of the school year, she remained a member of Morbrooke’s Alternative Education class. Her grades had improved overall from those of her seventh grade year and she told me she was “on the fence” about joining the high school’s alternative program -- “I think I might as well” (Interview, April, 2011). She continued to protest the school’s practices, but just a little less vehemently. As with the other students I got to know from the AE program, Sheina placed a value on education; however, it needed to be on her own terms and related to the *real world* she prioritized. Her mother had allowed Sheina to accompany her to a community college class one day and, to this young woman, the educational structure exemplified there represented how all of schooling should be done. She proposed an alternative program in which scheduling was flexible, with longer days and students taking breaks in-between classes. She expressed a wish for accommodating diverse educational methods in school practices: “I think they got to have a little variety, like there should be different schools for different kinds” (Interview, November, 2010). Sheina’s schooling reform suggestions closely resembled the schedules typically found within colleges, and aligned closely with the adult freedom of choice that she craved. Due to the fact that I held no school-sponsored authority over her, I had been fortunate to glimpse a little of this youth’s softer, altruistic side, and her support for education (ideas that Morbrooke’s more perceptive adults could only just suspect). I walked away from Sheina believing that the tough exterior identity she so often displayed was mostly a protective facade against school practices that were a critical mismatch to her own identity characteristics.

Discussion

As in any body of research this study has limitations. That I gathered data and participated in one class, that was unique to one school, and one district, limits the generalizability of its claims. However, this was not the goal of my work; instead, I wished to understand the manner in which one group of students who attended school in an alternative setting constructed their identities in relation to the practices of this one institution. I purport that this understanding may be transferable to an enhanced realization of wider schooling practices and to meeting the needs of additional youth in numerous other educational margins. I especially wished to add the voice (and thus the agency) of youth to this conversation. A second limitation of this study was that it only took place with eighth grade students, and those youth who are at-risk of failure within our educational system obviously span the entire continuum of grades. In relation to this specific work, this fact was also indicative of a limitation in the study’s setting – in this specific school, itself. Morbrooke’s entire alternative program consisted of solely the one eighth-grade class described herein. This fact begs that we question the fate of the youth who were similarly struggling (and non-Special Education qualified) in other grades within this school. Likewise, what of those young people this institution did not allow to enter the alternative program because they were judged to be exceedingly behaviorally challenging? While Morbrooke Middle School should be commended for its dedicated attempt to meet the needs of a small number of non-mandated, lesser-recognized young people, it was not adequately addressing the goal of successfully educating all of its students, a reality that is likewise oftentimes sadly true throughout today’s wider field.

The specific identity-related findings from this study lead directly to the following claims:

Multiply Constructed Identities of Youth

The identities of this study's participant students were multiply constructed within in-school and out-of school locations, and within the particular settings in which they interacted inside of the school. Additionally, the characteristics that led each young person to have an *at-risk* designation were distinctly unique. Although many Morbrooke adults (especially those not closely connected to the AE team) held essentializing opinions about the students and families connected to the alternative program, my interaction with these youth (and their parents) confirmed each young person's unique characteristics, along with the varying traits that had contributed to his/her at-risk determination.

Lauren (as do many youth in schools today) struggled with a physical activity level that was much higher than is acceptable in most traditional educational settings; the school, Lauren, and her parents all agreed upon this fact. However, as she discussed Lauren's state of continuous busy-ness, the tone of her step-mother's voice implied non-judgmental pride: "She's just very, very Lauren," (Interview, December, 2010). Both she and Lauren's father expressed their dilemma over whether, or not, to medicate their daughter for hyperactivity, and told me that they would do whatever was necessary to help her in school. However, they were hesitant to change "the most fun thing about Lauren" -- her artsy, somewhat "haphazard" side (Interview with parents, December, 2010). Lauren recognized the difficulty she had remaining still for long periods of time and clearly voiced how unnatural an inactive state was for her. In the school setting, I witnessed her be reprimanded in several classes for impulsiveness and observed a student who was sometimes hesitant to engage, an individual who appeared much different from the confident young woman I observed in Physical Education and art-based settings (Observations, Sept., 2010 - March, 2011).

Likewise, as I did not have school authority over, or responsibility for, Austin, I found him to be an unusually mature, curious, and world-wise youth. However, the adults of this school clearly constructed him as being inappropriately outspoken and opinionated, even as (in his statements to me) he came across as being one the strongest supporters of this institution's policies and adult leaders. Austin simply did not meet most educational professionals' usual expectations for acceptable middle school demeanor and compliance. Likewise, most of Morbrooke's students outside of the alternative program were hesitant to engage with this young man, although they did vote him to be the "Most Individualistic Eighth Grader," a public affirmation of uniqueness that he (and Lauren) proudly told me about during my last classroom visit to Morbrooke. The members of the AE class, along with a group of outside-of-program youth -- mainly young women, who dressed similarly in mostly black clothing -- made up a small, closely knit peer group, of which Austin was the apparent leader. Additionally, Austin related his acceptance by older youth, proudly telling me that he was closest to his high school brother and was a new member of this sibling's band.

As with Lauren's parents, Austin's mother was mostly accepting of her son's unique characteristics, although she did worry about their school-connected repercussions. She shared that they had first learned of the alternative program when they approached the principal in seventh grade because Austin was being bullied, but spoke of her son's "strong sense of what he thinks is right and wrong," and noted that she considered this to be "mostly a strength" (Interview, December, 2010). She told me:

You know, you're not just one thing. You don't have to just fit with one group. But they have to figure out something to identify themselves with. And I say you can have a lot of interests and be friends with a lot of different people. I

think it could be that school is less accepting of these differing identities.
(Interview, December, 2010)

Austin's mother, as did Austin himself, hoped the high school would be more accepting of individuality in students. Again (as with Lauren) the very characteristics about which this youth and parent expressed pride were those that challenged the educational system's constructions of expected *student*.

Lastly, the constructions related to Sheina were those that most strikingly differed between in-school and out-of-school representations of identity. Both Sheina and her mother constructed this fifteen-year old young woman as being a responsible adult and someone who could be given adult responsibilities, as those she continuously held inside of her home. However, the school's construction of Sheina was solely that of an insubordinate youth, one who constantly challenged and disobeyed the accepted rules of the institution. Sheina could not, or refused, to adjust her own construction of self to fit with the expectations of the school, and almost without exception, the school would not accept this young woman whom they constructed as being a problem or strive to meet the totality of her needs.

Student Resistance, and Affirmation, of Differences

Similarly to the female high school Puerto Rican students of Rolon-Dow's (2004) study, the participants of this work also both affirmed and resisted constructions of their *otherness* within the school; additionally, they both decried and applauded this institutionally inferred label. Overall, the youths and their parents voiced pride in the very characteristics that were at the center of the school's constructions of these students as being *different*. While each youth acknowledged the "small story" (Bamberg, 2006) identity constructions made by others of him/her during social interactions in the school environment, each also strongly held onto his/her own "big story" (Freeman, 2006) unique identity.

Lauren complained about the bullying she received regarding her clothing choices, yet made all of these selections herself, and told me that she bought most of her apparel from a well-known, alternative clothing store in the local mall. Although all parties agreed on Lauren's propensity for a high activity level, both she and her parents hesitated to agree to medicine that might alter what they considered to be her natural state (Interviews, October, 2010). This young woman's stepmother clearly defended her daughter's unique tendencies and commented, "Lauren likes kind of being different, an individual...so she's not really willing to change that part about her, or conform (Interview, December, 2010).

Although Austin also complained about others' judgments of him, he proudly owned his individuality, and claimed that many of his peers were "tools" and "posers.". Similar to Lauren's stepmother (as described in the previous section), Austin's mother was proud of her son's independent nature, and defended his (and other youths') right to be different.

Finally, Sheina was the most adamant youth in her affirmation of, and resistance to, the school's inference of *difference*. As she (and her mother) professed that Sheina assumed the responsibilities of an adult within the outer world, this young woman continuously struggled with the power differentials that are typically found in school practices. In relation to teachers, Sheina claimed: "They think they're better than us. And I think the reason why they became teachers is the controlling part... So you know, that's the thing I hate. I hate when people think they're better cause they're older" (Interview, November, 2010). She affirmed school constructions of her *otherness*, as strongly as she refused to change. Sheina looked forward to the high school where she thought it would be less restrictive and closer to the adult world that she desired: "It will be more free-er (sic) there and there will be less reason to rebel (Interview, November, 2010).

Lastly, in relation to school constructions of *difference*, it is important to note that in a number of conversations (Interviews, September 2010 -- April, 2011) some of Morbrooke's adults inferred that the homes of students in the alternative program were not adequately supportive: "AE students are those who have maybe lacked the guidance at home and maybe need it now, before they really start heading down the wrong path" (Interview with security guard, October, 2010). However, in my dealings with these students' parents, I did not find this conclusion to be true. Lauren was in the alternative program due to her stepmother's research of available school resources and advocating for her daughter's inclusion in this setting. Additionally, she and Lauren's dad thoroughly described their efforts to monitor her daily schoolwork from their home (Interview with parents, December, 2010). Sheina's mother had carefully described to me her long history (as previously detailed) of advocating for her daughter. Similarly, Austin's peer difficulties in school had first been brought to Morbrooke's attention through the efforts of his mother. Additionally, she was a vociferous advocate for the need for school practices that could meet the needs of all youth and not just her son:

It seems to me there have got to be a lot more [students] out there who struggle, and it's just kind of by accident that we found out about it [the program]. I don't know how they can better make it available to people. (Interview, December, 2010)

Therefore, my analysis of the parents' discourse additionally challenged constructions about alternative education students' families that were made by some members of Morbrooke Middle School.

Student-Sourced Suggestions for Change

Finally, one last finding from this work must be noted. These alternatively placed youth adamantly shared their originally conceived ideas for practices that (they argued) would be more truly effective and alternative. Although frequently assumed to be disengaged, each young person I spoke with placed value on schooling -- at this stage of her life, Lauren mainly cared about it in order to please her family, Austin spoke of becoming a lawyer in the future, and Sheina discussed what she perceived as Education's necessity for "real world" applications (Interviews, Sept. 2010 - April, 2011). Their suggestions particularly included a call for more flexible practices, ones that would be thoroughly centered within diverse students' needs and learning styles. Sheina's and Austin's suggestions for flexible scheduling and curriculum, and Lauren's apparent need for a more art-centered, activity-based instructional framework, were not frequently occurring within this study's setting; rather, this program's goal was a full return of its students to the general educational program. A realization of innovative, unique, goals must entail fuller discussions of, and reform efforts towards, more authentically *alternative* educational practices, along with a consideration of the effects on them from today's conflicting mandates for inclusion and standardization. This last, complex consideration was beyond the scope of this present study, and thus represents another limitation of it. Additionally, such a consideration entails a further implication for related, future research studies.

Implications/Relevance

This research effort advances knowledge that is related to a mostly unrecognized group of youth -- middle school students who are considered to be at risk of failing within

schools that are *officially* determined to be successful. It expands conceptualizations of research-worthy othered students and adds to Kumashiro's (2000) admonition for a continual consideration of lesser-recognized, marginalized groups. In this study, I advocate for a usage of youths' own narratives as a source for understanding identity construction, school engagement, and the educational practices related to these factors. Whereas the majority of studies connected to students labeled as being at-risk focus on the practices that typically comprise attempts at alternative schooling and/or efforts to *reform* these youth, this work exemplifies the value of constructing new knowledge through students' own perspectives and suggestions. Like the work of Varenne and McDermott (1998), I suggest that we consider the effects from an educational system centered on "cultural facts" (p. xiii) of predetermined notions of success and failure.

Additionally, this work suggests that by providing insight into adult school members' constructions of student difference, along with youths' own frequently manifested pride in self-recognized qualities of uniqueness, practices may result in which schools will consider *difference* as a potential asset, rather than as a problem. Ultimately, I contend that such efforts may lead to programs that are more authentically *alternative*. As was evidenced by the student members of this study, the youth who are often designated as being at-risk have the potential to add valuable suggestions to efforts toward reform in educational practices, an implication seconding Eisenhart's (2000) call for action, in the guise of school reform, to be determined in relation to youth-sourced considerations.

Lastly, while recognizing the inherent complexities that today's educational mandates present, this study suggests a need for honest and careful consideration around truly authentic alternative educational practices that may be necessary for some youth. In relation to these efforts, I argue that an enhanced consideration is necessary of all young people and of their own interpretations of schooling. A fuller understanding of the complete spectrum of youth, even those dwelling in the margins of our most successful schools, should be the goal of reform efforts.

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